DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 171 CG 024 238

AUTHOR Moses, Caroline E.; Kopplin, David
TITLE Applying Humanistic Principles to the Treatment of Runaway and Throwaway Adolescents.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association (38th, Austin, TX, April 16-18, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Child Rearing; Counseling Theories; Discipline; Family Problems; *Humanism; Models; *Runaways; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

The size of the runaway and throwaway population is alarming. Two primary reasons explain why programs for adolescent runaways have failed and each one is embedded historically in American culture. The first is that strict discipline and reform have been seen throughout history as the most appropriate manner by which to control youth. The second is the myth of the traditional American family as a supportive and enhancing environment for the growth of adolescents into mature adults. Three humanistic principles can be substituted for traditional values when perceptualizing throwaways and runaways. The first principle is recognizing human potential, the second is interpreting behavior through a family systems model, and the third is facilitating autonomy and moral development through responsible decision making. These three humanistic principles challenge traditional assumptions about the treatment of youth at a fundamental level. This model assumes that adolescents can acquire the metacognitive abilities that will enable them to survive adaptively on the street. The shift in perspective is not subtle and it will not be sufficient for an agency to recognize only one or two aspects of this approach for all three are essential to avoid a model of coercion and victim blame. If these principles are implemented and adhered to, adolescents will develop adaptive rather than destructive skills and self-schemas which will allow them to become psychologically healthy, well-adjusted adults. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

APPLYING HUMANISTIC PRINCIPLES TO THE TREATMENT OF RUNAWAY AND THROWAWAY ADOLESCENTS

Caroline E. Moses David Kopplin

Baylor University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Caroline Moses

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED345171

CG024238

The size of the runaway and throwaway population is alarming. For example, on any given night, approximately three hundred adolescents are living on the street in the Houston, Texas area. In total, 1-1.5 million adolescents runaway each year. However, literature on this population does not support a specific model for a successful treatment of these adolescents. Most models are unsuccessful; adolescents rarely stay in shelter or residential programs for more than a week or two.

Two primary reasons explain why programs for adolescents runaways have failed, and each is embedded historically in American culture. The first is that strict discipline and reform have been seen throughout our history as the most appropriate manner by which to control youth. The second is the myth of the traditional American family.

The notion that adolescents must be disciplined and controlled through reform and punishment has been pervasive throughout American history; therefore, the oppressive justice and reform systems which were established in the 1840's have undergone little modification since that time. Adolescents continue to be perceived as status offenders and are blamed and punished for their decision to run away. Even in "nontraditional" shelters or residential settings where the physical environment is designed to be comfortable and casual, a victimizing and oppressive disciplinary philosophy often remains embedded in the therapeutic style of staff.

The perpetuation of the myth of the traditional American family is the second reason why runaway programs have failed. The home has traditionally been idealized as a supportive and enhancing environment for the growth of adolescents into mature adults who will develop adaptive coping skills, appropriate moral values, and high self-esteem.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

However, family historians have been unable to identify a period in America's past when family life was untroubled, and abuse and conflict remain common family problems. Therefore, it is often unreasonable to expect that adolescents who have runaway will benefit by returning to the family environment, or that they should prefer to want to live at home. Treatment that encourages denial of the reality of oppressive homes from which the adolescents ran will not be beneficial. It is also unreasonable to expect that adolescent runaways will have learned adaptive skills at home which will help them cope effectively as they adjust to life on the street.

The successful treatment of adolescent runaways in shelters or residential facilities requires a philosophic and psychological shift in perspective from the traditional model of condemning, blaming, and punishing adolescents for running away and then expecting them to return home where they will guided to maturity, to an enabling model of providing an enhancing environment where adolescents can develop the necessary and prerequisite skills for adaptive survival at home or on the street.

Three humanistic principles can be substituted for our traditional values when perceptualizing throwaways and runaways. The first principle is recognizing human potential, the second is interpreting behavior through a family systems model, and the third is facilitating autonomy and moral development through responsible decision making.

The first principle, recognizing human potential, provides a philosophical base from which programmatic actions follow. This view requires more than simply treating adolescents with empathy, respect, and positive regard; it requires deliberate and specific action to help them change the negative self schemas which they most likely developed while living in an oppressive home.

Since dysfunction appears to mark the runaway family environment, runaway adolescents need to develop a repertoire of positive cognitive experiences. Runaways have been told they are failures at home and have also been labeled as failures by society.

Cognitively oriented therapy techniques can be used to help adolescents learn to perceive themselves and their abilities more positively and realistically. Beck's cognitive therapy or Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy would be examples of models which could facilitate awareness of cognitive distortions and dysfunctional thoughts. These techniques can be used formally in sessions but also informally in daily interactions.

The ideal treatment milieu is such that each staff member actively points out spontaneous situations in which an adolescent has successful behavioral experiences. For example, if an adolescent sets the table or offers to help a friend without being asked, this is acknowledged as a success where the adolescent receives positive reinforcement. Conditions should be purposefully set up to facilitate successful experiences. For example, planning activities where adolescents can feel successful such as learning to balance a checkbook, find a job, or choose a social environment which will help them feel a sense of accomplishment and success at achieving goals.

The second principle involves interpreting adolescent behavior in part as a function of a family system. The systems model emphasizes that communication and influence are interactive. Adolescents learn that communication is bidirectional; therefore, their behaviors affect and are affected by others. They come to understand the degree to which their behavior was and is a function of the system of their past and present relationships. By sharing information and feelings, and giving and receiving feedback to peers and staff, adolescents learn to develop enhancing and healthy relationships. By integrating a family systems model into an overall humanistic treatment approach, adolescents are offered an alternative understanding and experience to their role as victim in daily interactions. However, the goal of implementing a systems approach in treatment is not to prepare the adolescent for living at home. Of the adolescents who runaway, only 36% return home to live. The goal is to help the adolescent develop adaptive interpersonal skills that will facilitate effectiveness in current and future relationships.

This approach also provides an important step toward instilling responsibility for one's behavior and helps an adolescent realize that one's actions reflect and are reflected beyond the present moment. To enable adolescents to build competence in interpersonal relationships, it is necessary that staff act as models, behaving and expressing feelings congruently, and acting consistently in their relationships with adolescents and other staff members.

The third principle, facilitating autonomy and moral development through responsible decision making, is intended to address the dilemma of adolescents who leave home because they feel oppressed, but once they are on the street, they use maladaptive coping strategies to attempt to manage stress, maintain autonomy, and meet their physical, social, and psychological needs. In the therapeutic milieu, effective problem solving and decision making skills can be incorporated successfully into most aspects of the daily schedule of events and interactions.

Adaptive decision making skills should be practiced consistently throughout the program, and adolescents should participate as much as possible in the decisions that impact their lives. This includes decisions that effect their experience in the shelter or residential center as well as decisions that concern them individually. The shelter model should be aimed at effective self management in daily choices, opportunities, and responsibilities. Decisions that enhance an adolescent's moral development should also be included in this process. For example, discussion should include how an adolescent should be treated when he or she breaks a rule, violates another's rights, or fails to fulfill responsibilities.

The goal of the decision making process is to enable adolescents to cope with stress and make functional, autonomous decisions that are socially adaptive. The key to facilitation of adaptive decision making is to help adolescents determine why they make specific choices and help them decide whether their choices will be adaptive in the future. Staff are negotiators who listen to an adolescent's situation and help him or her

determine, through "cost and benefit" analysis or other problem solving strategies, what should be done. Staff should also help adolescents generate and evaluate alternative options and proposals rather than approach a situation as if the outcome had one obvious solution and a dichotomous set of possibilities.

These three humanistic principles challenge traditional assumptions about the treatment of youth at a fundamental level. This model assumes that adolescents can acquire the metacognitive abilities that will enable them to survive adaptively on the street. The shift in perspective is not subtle. It will not be sufficient for an agency to recognize only one or two aspects of this approach for all three are essential to avoid a model of coercion and victim blame. Humanistic principles must be applied together, simultaneously and congruently. And, it is my belief that if these principles are implemented and adhered to, to replace traditional views, adolescents will develop adaptive rather than destructive skills and self schemas which will allow them to become psychologically healthy, well adjusted adults.